



BRIAN FERGUSON

Readers Write POSSESSIONS

FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS I LIVED in Africa and Haiti as a Peace Corps volunteer. Though I carried only what would fit into my backpack, my Swiss Army knife, water purifier, wristwatch, and eyeglasses set me apart as a wealthy man. I was inspired by the resourcefulness of the people I worked with, who washed clothes in a wheelbarrow, fried eggs on a shovel, turned tin cans into lanterns, and made a cookstove from scrap car parts.

Today I live in a one-room cabin in the woods. I have an outdoor fire ring and an indoor stove that I made out of a fifty-five-gallon barrel. Other barrels collect rainwater from my gutters. I use this water to clean dishes, wash clothes, and take showers. My drinking water comes from my neighbor's well. The taste is enhanced by the quarter-mile hike through the countryside.

A single candle illuminates my entire twelve-by-twenty-foot house. The walls are free of outlets, switches, and cords. The only electrical device I own is a solar-

powered radio. I have a small table with three chairs (Thoreau said three chairs is the right amount) and a few shelves of books, dishes, and spices. In the corner behind my door is my composting toilet, and next to it, the ladder to the loft where I sleep.

A sign on my wall reads: "If there is something you need that you don't see, please let me know, and I'll show you how to do without it."

*Richard Herman
Elkland, Missouri*

WHEN I WAS IN MY EARLY FORTIES, my husband, Jerry, took in a stray kitten. "This may be the last cat we own," he said. He was feeling old. I told him not to worry: many of my relatives lived into their nineties.

A few years later I was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer.

First there were the physical losses. I wanted to say goodbye to my breast in a meaningful way, so my sister and I got

out my paints and brushes and wrote farewell messages on my skin: "Thanks for being part of the team for fifty years." "You'll be missed. Love, your fellow appendages." The nurses laughed when they saw our artwork, and the surgeon apologized for having to mess it up. I was home petting the cat and walking around the block within twenty-four hours.

Since the operation, I've had to let go of my appearance. I barely recognize myself in the mirror because of the thirty-pound weight gain and the hair loss. I like to blame the weight on steroids, but there is also the part of me that says, "Better enjoy those Oreos while you can."

I'm ridding the garage of junk Jerry won't need when I'm gone: the flute I picked up shortly after college; my graduate-school textbooks; baskets that I will neither decorate nor use. As these possessions disappear or are passed on, I gain emotional and spiritual gifts to replace them.

I've decided to purge my life of un-

necessary clutter, to act on values that were previously buried beneath the busyness. In return, I receive time: to read and write; to take an art class; to talk to friends over a leisurely cup of coffee.

A cancer diagnosis grants the freedom of lowered expectations. Nowadays, if I get out of bed and into my clothes, I call it a successful morning. I've let modesty go. Some evenings, after sunset, I walk around the block in my pj's and bathrobe. I've since learned that other blocks in my neighborhood have their own "bathrobe walkers."

At night the cat snuggles up under my husband's chin and stretches out a paw. This won't be the last cat Jerry owns, but it will probably be my last. When I am gone, I hope the cat will be a comfort to Jerry on the lonely nights.

*Debora Wilson
Long Beach, California*

MY GRANDMOTHER GAVE EACH OF her seven granddaughters a beautifully crafted twenty-four-karat gold ring with two black stripes circling the middle. While we tried them on our fingers, she explained that she'd had a jeweler in India make the bands, and that the stripes were hairs "from the elephant I shot."

I froze. I am an animal-rights activist. I support stricter punishments for poachers and oppose the use of elephants in circus acts. My grandmother knew this, and could tell I was uncomfortable receiving her gift. "It was different then," she assured me.

She described how she'd killed an immature African elephant on a safari with my grandfather forty years before. When my grandparents had moved from India to Africa, my grandfather had helped the Kenyan government with the culling of "nuisance creatures," including young male pachyderms who had lost their adult role models to poachers and were left to ravage the countryside and terrorize the people.

Her feelings clearly hurt by my reaction, my grandmother told me, "If you won't wear it, give it to your brother, for his future wife."

But as troubled as I was by this gift, I didn't want to give it away.

My grandmother had been a Catholic

Indian living in Africa, wearing Western clothes and hairstyles, raising five children mostly by herself. She was also an excellent shot. I love the story of how she once shot a black mamba that had slithered too close to her child's crib. She is still a strong, independent spirit who loves to laugh. She takes great pride in her Indian heritage, but at the same time believes India was better when the British were in charge: "Much cleaner."

Whenever I visit her at her small mobile home in rural Massachusetts, I am aware of all she gave up when she fled the political unrest in a newly independent Kenya. But she never complains. She feels lucky to live in the U.S.

I have kept the ring, but I do not wear it. It hangs on a string, tacked to my office wall, where I see it every day. I'm still figuring out its significance for me. Ironically, of all the granddaughters, I am the only one whose finger the ring fit perfectly.

*Danube Jacobs
Portland, Maine*

I WAS A SUBURBAN STAY-AT-HOME mother of one until my husband and I decided we needed a change. He quit his job, and we sold our most valuable belongings: cars, cameras, antiques. We figured if we could live on rice and beans, we wouldn't need an income for a while. We were going to buy ourselves a half year of freedom.

The three of us took off across the country, pulling a little trailer, and spent six glorious months living out our fantasy of adventure and family togetherness. I loved the simplicity of the traveling life: Three towels, one frying pan, no TV. No garage overflowing with baby clothes and Halloween decorations and unlabeled cassette tapes and special-occasion china. I couldn't imagine going back to our old existence.

When we returned home, we decided to make our new living arrangement permanent, and got busy cleaning out the house to sell it. As the clutter lifted, I felt freer, younger, more daring. I also felt superior to my neighbors, who were trapped

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Tests	July 1	December 2005
Playing With Fire	August 1	January 2006
Coffee	September 1	February 2006
The Middle Of The Night	October 1	March 2006
Decisions	November 1	April 2006
Winners and Losers	December 1	May 2006

in their lives of consumption.

My husband and I bought a big Air-stream trailer, stowed the necessities in it, and set out, debt-free and unfettered. Part-time work covered the grocery bills and left us with plenty of time to spend together. We home-schooled our daughter; lived in beautiful, unspoiled places; and congratulated ourselves for having had the courage to escape middle-class American life.

Last spring, our travels took us back to our old hometown. Visiting a friend's house, I noticed a little gourd painted to look like an animal. It looked so familiar. Then I realized: it used to be mine. Though I'd once been glad to be rid of it, after seeing it in her house that day, I wanted it back. I felt as if I were pressing my nose to the window of Tiffany's, coveting some precious gem.

That night I parked in front of the home we used to own. I didn't feel smug or smart or free. I thought, *I used to live somewhere. I used to have a real life. I used to have a lot of nice things.*

Then I went home to the rv park, where our motor home was glowing with cozy warmth. I hugged my husband and daughter tight and remembered that home is wherever the three of us are together. But that night, like many other nights thereafter, I lay awake for hours in our little bed and felt as inconsequential as a shadow, a ghost adrift in the world.

*Tina Hedin
Roseland, Florida*

MY FATHER IS DUTCH AND GREW UP in Indonesia when it was a Dutch colony. His family had a huge colonial-style home filled with expensive antiques and art brought over from Europe. They had cars and many valuable books. My grandfather brought home orphaned tigers, bears, and monkeys to raise as pets, and my father's childhood home was always bustling and full of beauty.

Then, during World War II, the Japanese invaded the islands. My grandfather threw the family heirlooms down the well minutes before the Japanese kicked open their door. Everything was confiscated, except for what they could fit into one suitcase apiece.

The Japanese sent their Dutch captives to concentration camps, where prisoners received one cup of rice per day to eat. The women and children went to one camp, and the men to another. When my father turned ten, he was sent to the men's camp, along with his best friend, who was so heartbroken at being separated from his mother that he stopped talking, drinking, and eating. When he died, the Japanese guards gave my father the contents of the dead boy's suitcase.

My father was able to trade these toys and clothes for an extra handful of rice a day. He was also able to get bananas from natives through the fence, and when he became weak, he traded the fruit for lighter work assignments. While others died of starvation, my father stayed alive.

When U.S. troops finally liberated the Dutch prisoners, my father returned to Holland with only the clothes on his back. He later immigrated to the U.S., worked his way through college, married, had three children, and bought a large house overlooking the Pacific in southern California.

My father is now in his seventies. I visited him a few years ago, while my mother was on a trip to Europe. When I opened the cupboard in his kitchen, I found rows of used Styrofoam cups, plastic "sporks," and neatly stacked fast-food French-fry boxes. A drawer was filled to the brim with corks.

I was emptying hundreds of corks into the garbage when my father came in and saw me. He flew into a panic and scooped the corks back out. "You wait," he fumed. "One day you'll need these."

Exasperated, I shouted, "For what?"

"One day, you'll need to burn the ends to make charcoal," he said. "So don't come running to me when you have nothing to write with!"

Thankfully I have never known absolute poverty, the loss of everything and everybody familiar, the sort of deprivation that would make someone hoard corks in a million-dollar house.

*Mieke E.
San Rafael, California*

DURING THE TWENTY-FIVE YEARS I spent in a six-by-nine-foot prison cell, a slim volume called the "operational pro-

cedure" detailed what prisoners were permitted to own. Each inmate could have two pairs of bluejeans (no decorative zippers, extra pockets, or designer labels); one ring (plain, no stones); one watch (not to exceed fifty dollars in value); and so on. We were allowed only ten books, including magazines and newspapers.

Somehow my roommate and I always managed to exceed these limits. And we were not alone. When the guards came sweeping down the hall for surprise room searches, we'd madly stuff our possessions into our lockers. The items that were prohibited — scissors, drawing pens, hot-water bottles — we would store in unobtrusive places, hoping they would remain unnoticed. Sometimes it worked. If it didn't, we would lose the item for good. This was always a blow, but we learned to get over it quickly, in the best attitude of nonattachment.

When I was released from prison six months ago, I had six cartons of books, two cartons of clothing, four cartons of art supplies and artwork, and at least six heavy cartons of legal paperwork. It cost me more than four hundred dollars to mail all of it home. How, I wondered, did I, a practicing yogi, acquire all this in a prison where the rules allowed only six cubic feet of personal property? And why was it necessary to haul it all with me?

As I continue to unpack and sort through these items, the answer becomes clear: My history is in these cartons, twenty-five years of my life. I cherish these possessions. I weep over them. I smile. I guess I will have to come back in yet another lifetime to learn nonattachment.

*Jeri Becker
Santa Rosa, California*

I HAVE LOST THREE PERSONAL LI-braries in my life. The first disappeared when I was fifteen. We were moving, and Mother gave me three days to decide which books to keep and which to throw away. I tried to persuade her that books were not mere possessions to be casually discarded, but she held firm. I ended up with one box of discards and six boxes to keep.

When we arrived at our new home in Michigan, I discovered that Mother had mistakenly thrown out the six boxes of

good books and left me with the collected works of Mickey Spillane. "They're only books," she said.

In my twenties, I acquired 1,500 books while my first husband was dying of melanoma. I read my way through Ron's seven-year illness, losing myself in any story that helped me to forget.

After Ron's death, I found a new love and ran off with him to Mexico. My friend Ruth agreed to store my library while I was gone. When I returned home three months later, I learned that Ruth had sold all my books at a garage sale. "I wasn't sure you would ever come back," she said.

I married that new love and for the next seventeen years tended my library as if it were an English garden, selecting only the best and ruthlessly weeding out any book that didn't deserve space. As my library grew, I installed floor-to-ceiling bookcases in each room. I amassed more than three thousand books.

I was home alone the night that an accidental fire gutted our house. After the firefighters left, I tracked down my husband by phone and told him that our home was a waterlogged, charred shell. He told me he had fallen in love with his new female boss and wouldn't be home that night. Maybe never.

For months afterward, I would burst into tears when I saw one of *my* books on a bookstore shelf. I cried more over the lost books than I did over my lost husband.

I now have a third husband and a fourth library, with books scattered here and there, in no particular order. Many are trashy detective novels that I read in airports and motel rooms when business takes me on the road. Every once in a while, without a twinge, I donate bags of them to a friend's used bookstore. It's time to live the life for which books prepared me.

Bonnie B.
Mason, Michigan

I JUST CAME ACROSS MY FATHER'S solid-gold Omega watch in my file cabinet. Deep, extensive engraving on the back commemorates fifty years of service to the Chicago Paper Company, 1917 to 1967. The alligator band is cracked, dry, and curved, even after thirty-two years of lying flat in its coffinlike satin-lined

case.

This watch came to me in the mail in 1972, sent by the woman who was with my father the night he died. I intended to give the Omega to my brother as soon as he kicked the heroin habit he'd picked up during his service in Vietnam. But he couldn't quit, and then he disappeared for twenty-five years. He turned up in New Mexico last year in a terminal coma, his skull shattered by a baseball bat.

The watch makes me feel sad when I look at it, even though it isn't the one my father wore when he hit my mother, or when he broke my nose. He didn't get *this* watch until he retired, twenty years later.

The watch is self-winding. Just the tiniest motion makes it start ticking. I own this beautiful piece of machinery, yet here I am wearing a fifteen-dollar Timex. I try on the Omega, but the strap is so long it comes around and eclipses the face. I should buy a new band for it, but the Timex still works fine, and I hate to spend money on nonessentials. Besides, that big watch would look silly on my tiny wrist.

I could sell it, but the personal engraving would probably diminish its value. Besides, I'd feel guilty. I'd give the Omega to my son, but I'm afraid it might have a curse attached to it, and he doesn't need any more problems. And I'm worried he might sell it for less than it's worth.

The watch and its curse (if any) are mine. I put the watch back in the file cabinet. Sometimes mementos of pain are as precious as those of triumph.

Nancy D.
Culver City, California

WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, MY family home was an eight-foot-wide trailer parked in a campground on the wrong side of the levee, where the law prohibited building permanent residences. Besides our trailer, there were only willows and cottonwoods and the swirling green water of the Feather River, which every few years would flood, forcing us to tow our house to a field beside the county airport. The roaring crop-dusters would wake us up at five every morning. Eventually the waters would recede, and we'd return to the park.

My mother was a teacher's aide, and

my stepdad worked with me at Dan's Bait and Tackle. I had worked there since I was thirteen and had all the fishing gear I wanted. I was an awkward boy, and fishing on the weekends was my respite from lonely days at school.

Eventually I made some friends and began dating Nicole. For the first time I experienced the touch of a girl's skin and the taste of her lips. We planned to go to the junior prom together.

By then Mom had managed to buy a rusty, twenty-year-old Datsun pickup for \$250. She painted the truck herself with two cans of royal blue Rust-Oleum, the bold brush strokes clearly visible in the sun. I pulled the inside door panels off and re-covered them with some scrap naugahyde.

One spring evening, Nicole and I were driving home from a movie in that hand-painted blue pickup when she wondered aloud, "Do people really go to the prom in a truck like this?"

I realized then that this girl I had imagined spending my life with was embarrassed by my poverty. I felt a flash of anger. For a moment I imagined pulling to the curb and telling her to get out. But when I turned to her, I saw the only girl whose touch I had ever known.

"They do if that's what they own," I said. Nicole was quiet after that.

A few weeks later, Nicole announced that she had arranged for us to double-date to the prom with her best friend. The friend's boyfriend, coincidentally, drove a nice car.

David Ragland
Sonora, California

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